

Black First-Generation College Students' Strengths

Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Bachelor of Science in Social Work
in the College of Social Work of The Ohio State University

By

Sly Worthy Jr.

Undergraduate Program in Social Work

The Ohio State University

2021

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Natasha Bowen, Advisor

Copyright by
Sly Worthy Jr.
2021

Abstract

The study in this article investigated the strengths of Black first-generation college students (FGCS) at The Ohio State University. Participants consisted of 119 Black FGCS, from the age of 18-25, who attended Ohio State. This cross-sectional quantitative study utilized a Qualtrics survey and the VIA-IS-P character strengths survey from the VIA Institute on Character. The results revealed that Black FGCS scored the highest in *Kindness, Fairness, Perspective, Honesty, and Curiosity*. Males scored higher in *Curiosity, Creativity, and Bravery* than females. *Hope, Leadership, Gratitude, Bravery, Zest, and Perseverance* had a positive correlation with age. Students who identified as Pell Grant eligible or who were unsure about their Pell Grant status scored lower in *Bravery* and *Leadership* than those who were not Pell Grant eligible. Students who had a grade point average of 3.0 – 3.499 scored higher in *Creativity, Bravery, and Zest* than students who had a grade point average below 3.0 and 3.5 and above. This study established that Black FGCS scored high in all 24-character strengths measured. Therefore, their lower performance on average in higher education is not due to character flaws, but more likely to environmental factors. The findings suggest we should build interventions around this population's strengths, we need to conduct more research on the population, and develop a consistent definition for what a first-generation college student is.

Dedication

This is dedicated to all the other Black first-generation college students at The Ohio State University. Often, we are looked at by others in a way that only considers what we need while simultaneously overlooking what we possess. I hope this thesis will allow others to understand that this population has a lot of strengths that should be recognized and utilized when working with us. To all the Black first-generation college students remember that you have strengths, you deserve to be here, you can accomplish anything you put your mind to, and that I love you.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge my faculty advisor Dr. Natasha Bowen for providing their expertise, patience, guidance, and support throughout this rigorous process. I would like to acknowledge the Office of Diversity and Inclusion and the Young Scholars Program for giving me the opportunity to pursue higher education. I would like to acknowledge Dr. James Moore for pushing me to not only join the honors program but to take on a senior thesis. I would like to acknowledge Dr. Scott Graves for introducing me to research and investing their time, effort, and knowledge into me inside and outside of the academic setting. I would like to acknowledge Andrea Severson for always giving me the love and support throughout my undergraduate journey. I would like to acknowledge Jennie Babcock, for encouraging me and guiding me through this process every step of the way. I would like to acknowledge the entire College of Social Work, for investing their time, resources, and support into my future. I would like to acknowledge the entire Buckeyes First Student Organization allowing me to be a part of something greater than myself. Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge and thank my friends, family, and the entire city of Lorain. You all have drowned me in love and support which will never go unnoticed.

Vita

June 2017.....Lorain High School

May 2021.....B.S. Social Work, Honors with Research Distinction,
Magna Cum Laude, The Ohio State University

April 2021.....3rd Place at the 2021 College of Social Work Honors
Showcase

Fields of Study

Major Field: Social Work

Double Major Field: African American and African Studies

Minor Field: Education

Table of Content

| | |
|------------------------------|-----|
| Abstract..... | iii |
| Dedication..... | iv |
| Acknowledgements..... | v |
| Vita and Field of Study..... | vi |

Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Background of the Problem..... | 1 |
| Purpose and Significance of the Study..... | 9 |
| Conceptual Frame of Reference..... | 9 |
| Aims/Research Questions..... | 10 |

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

| | |
|----------------------|----|
| Introduction..... | 11 |
| Body..... | 11 |
| Chapter Summary..... | 15 |

Chapter 3: Methodology

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Research Design..... | 17 |
| Population and Sample Design..... | 17 |
| Data Collection Procedures..... | 17 |
| Data Collection Instruments..... | 18 |
| Chapter Summary..... | 20 |

Chapter 4: Results

| | |
|--------------|----|
| Results..... | 21 |
|--------------|----|

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

| | |
|--------------------------|----|
| Summary of Findings..... | 28 |
|--------------------------|----|

| | |
|--|----|
| Conclusions and Implications of this Study | 29 |
|--|----|

| | |
|------------------|----|
| Limitations..... | 29 |
|------------------|----|

| | |
|----------------------|----|
| Recommendations..... | 30 |
|----------------------|----|

Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem

Introduction

There are many definitions for “first-generation college students (FGCS),” the main one used is a student’s parent/guardian did not receive a bachelor’s degree or higher. Their counterparts are continuing-generation college students (CGCS) (Research Triangle Institute (RTI), 2019). These students are undergraduate students with at least one parent/guardian with a bachelor’s or higher degree. In 2015-2016, 56% of undergraduates were identified as first-generation college students (RTI, 2019). This definition does lead to questions about whether you are a FGCS if your older siblings, extended family members, or even guardians who are not biological possess four-year college degree. Some researchers and institutions remove the FGCS label from students whose parents have enrolled in a college course, while some have chosen to extend the FGCS label to students who parents completed a four-year degree outside of the United States (Center for First-generation Student Success, 2017). We need a consistent FGCS definition, as this will allow for more inclusion and more consistent research.

Background of the Problem

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965. HEA was meant to address the access the disparities in education and to assist students from low-income and marginalized communities. The government carried out their mission by creating federal grants, loans, and designing programs (tutoring, mentoring, etc.) to make sure low-income and potential FGCS could not only have access to college but be able to graduate with a degree (Center for First-generation Student Success, 2019). The first three program were known as the Federal TRIO Programs which consisted of Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Special Services for Disadvantaged Students. The TRIO expanded by adding the Educational

Opportunity Centers, Veterans Upward Bound, Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program and the Upward Bound Math-Science (Center for First-generation Student Success, 2019). As a result of the Higher Education Act of 1965, more than 5 million Americans have gone through a TRIO program and become a FGCS grad (Center for First-generation Student Success, 2019).

FGCS Compared to CGCS in the United States

The following statistics were collected from the Research Triangle Institute (2019), where they compared first-generation college students (FGCS) and their continuing-generation (CGCS) counterparts:

- Attended full time: 40% FGCS and 48% CGCS
- Had dependents: 30% FGCS and 16% CGCS
- Veterans: 5% FGCS and 3% CGCS
- Female: 60% FGCS and 52% CGCS
- White: 46% FGCS and 61% CGCS
- Black or African American: 18% FGCS and 12% CGCS
- Hispanic/Latinx/a/o: 25% FGCS and 14% CGCS
- Asian: 6% FGCS and 8% CGCS
- American Indian or Alaska Native: 1% FGCS and 0.5% CGCS
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander: 0.5% FGCS and 0.4% CGCS
- Median Parental Income Among Dependent Students: \$41,000 FGCS and \$90,000 CGCS
- Percentages of Undergraduates Who Were First-Generation by Sector
 - Public 4-year: 47%

- Public 2-year: 64%
- Private nonprofit 4-year: 43%
- Private nonprofit 2-year: 69%
- Private for-profit 4-year: 72%
- Private for-profit 2-year: 70%

In the United States, within six years of going to college, 89% of low-income FGCS leave without a degree (First Generation Foundation, 2013). In 2016-17 the adjusted graduation rate for public high schools in the United States was 85%, only two demographics exceeded this number, Asian/Pacific Islander (91%) and White (89%) students. The demographics that were below the average were Hispanics (80%), Black (78%), and American Indian/Alaska Native (72%) students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). With minoritized populations graduating high school at disproportionately lower rates, they are also underrepresented in higher education.

FGCS at The Ohio State University

The Ohio State University defines a first-generation college student as students of whom neither parent earn a four-year bachelor's degree (The Ohio State University, 2021). The Ohio State University consists of six campuses: the main campus is in Columbus and the regional campuses are in Lima, Mansfield, Marion, Newark, and Wooster. The following statistics were collected and shared with me from The Ohio State University Office of Student Academic Success (The Ohio State University Office of Student Academic Success, 2020):

The number of first-generation undergraduates by campus and sex for autumn 2020:

- Columbus total number of FGCS/total number of students =
10,343/46,984
 - Male: 4,781
 - Female: 5,562
- Lima total number of FGCS/total number of students = 327/988
 - Male: 133
 - Female: 194
- Mansfield total number of FGCS/total number of students = 397/1,011
 - Male: 146
 - Female: 291
- Marion total number of FGCS/total number of students = 369/1,157
 - Male: 162
 - Female: 207
- Newark total number of FGCS/total number of students = 1,074/2,870
 - Male: 459
 - Female: 615
- Wooster total number of FGCS/total number of students = 172/547
 - Male: 60
 - Female: 112
- University total number of FGCS/total number of students =
12,682/53,557
 - Male: 5,741
 - Female: 6,941

Out of all the students at The Ohio State University, about 24% of them are identified as first-generation college students.

The number of first-generation undergraduates by campus and ethnicity for autumn 2020:

- Columbus total number of FGCS by ethnicity:
 - Hispanic: 829
 - American Indian/Alaska Native: 4
 - Asian: 896
 - Black or African American: 1,492
 - Native Hawaiian/Pacific Island: 8
 - Two or More Races: 534
 - White: 5,545
 - Non-Resident : 825
 - None Given/Race Unknown: 210
- Regionals total number of FGCS by ethnicity:
 - Hispanic: 143
 - American Indian/Alaska Native: 5
 - Asian: 112
 - Black or African American: 399
 - Native Hawaiian/Pacific Island: 1
 - Two or More Races: 137
 - White: 1,497

- Non-Resident: 3
- None Given/Race Unknown: 42
- University total number of FGCS by ethnicity:
 - Hispanic: 972
 - American Indian/Alaska Native: 9
 - Asian: 1,008
 - Black or African American: 1,891
 - Native Hawaiian/Pacific Island: 9
 - Two or More Races: 671
 - White: 7,042
 - Non-Resident: 828
 - None Given/Race Unknown: 252

There is a total of 4,140 Black or African American students at The Ohio State University, about 46% of those students are identified as FGCS. That is the largest between any ethnicity at Ohio State, the Hispanic ethnicity is the closest to this percentage at about 36% (The Ohio State University Office of Student Academic Success, 2020).

The number of first-generation undergraduates by campus and Pell grant eligibility for autumn 2020:

- Columbus FGCS who are Pell Grant eligible:
 - Yes: 4,469 out of 8,789 are FGCS
 - No: 5,874 out of 38,195 are FGCS
- Lima FGCS that are Pell grant eligible:

- Yes: 129 out of 278 are FGCS
- No: 198 out of 710 are FGCS
- Mansfield FGCS who are Pell Grant eligible:
 - Yes: 193 out of 365 are FGCS
 - No: 204 out of 646 are FGCS
- Marion FGCS who are Pell Grant eligible:
 - Yes: 172 out of 328 are FGCS
 - No: 197 out of 829 are FGCS
- Newark FGCS who are Pell Grant eligible:
 - Yes: 510 out of 912 are FGCS
 - No: 564 out of 1,958 are FGCS
- Wooster FGCS who are Pell Grant eligible:
 - Yes: 56 out of 120 are FGCS
 - No: 116 out of 427 are FGCS
- University total FGCS who are Pell Grant eligible:
 - Yes: 5,529 out of 10,792 are FGCS
 - No: 7,153 out of 42,765 are FGCS

FGCS account for more than half of all Pell Grant eligible students at The Ohio State University. Students who are eligible for Pell Grant display financial need.

**The number of first-generation undergraduates in each university college at
The Ohio State University, including regional campuses for autumn 2020:**

- Agriculture: 667, 31.8% of students in this college are FGCS

- Architecture: 164, 26.7% of students in this college are FGCS
- Arts & Sciences: 4,925, 25.4% of students in this college are FGCS
- Business: 1,296, 17.2% of students in this college are FGCS
- Dentistry: Dental Hygiene: 74, 36.8% of students in this college are FGCS
- Education and Human Ecology: 1,147, 29.1% of students in this college are FGCS
- Engineering: 1,279, 16.3% of students in this college are FGCS
- Environmental and Natural Resources: 187, 21.2% of students in this college are FGCS
- Exploring: 1,290, 31.4% of students in this college are FGCS
- Health and Rehabilitation Sciences: 582, 26.9% of students in this college are FGCS
- Public Affairs: 82, 23.6% of students in this college are FGCS
- Medicine: 2, 2.0% of students in this college are FGCS
- Continuing Education: 101, 14.2% of students in this college are FGCS
- Nursing: 213, 19.1% of students in this college are FGCS
- Public Health: 70, 21.5% of students in this college are FGCS
- Pharmacy: 135, 27.8% of students in this college are FGCS
- Social Work: 360, 42.1% of students in this college are FGCS
- Undergraduate Student Academic Services: 108, 12.7% of students in this college are FGCS

FGCS at The Ohio State University consists of about 42% of the entire The College of Social Work.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

There are apparent gaps in research around first-generation college students. Most of the research around FGCS is heavily focused on the White, Latinx, and Asian communities. Overall, most current research examines first-generation college students through a deficit approach, seeking to understand what they are lacking and why many are not academically successful. We are in desperate need for research around this specific population. About 24% of The Ohio State University's population is considered FGCS and that number will continue to grow. Out of the 4,140 Black students at The Ohio State University, about 46% of them are FGCS, which is the largest percentage of any racial/ethnic demographic to be first-generation. I want my study to change the narrative of the research around FGCS and identify the strengths of Black first-generation college students here at The Ohio State University so we can determine how can we use those strengths to assist this population succeed in higher education.

Conceptual Frame of Reference

Many of the current studies on FGCS utilize a deficit approach. Deficit-focused models focus on identifying students' needs, problems, and weaknesses (Jimerson et al., 2004). On the contrary, we have a strength-based approach. Epstein and Sharma (1998) have defined strength-based assessment as "the measurement of those emotional and behavioral skills, competencies, and characteristics which create a sense of personal accomplishment; contribute to satisfying relationships with family members, peers, and adults; enhance one's ability to deal with adversity and stress; and promote one's personal, social, and academic development (p.3)." This study will utilize a strengths-based approach to analyze students who identify as Black or African American first-generation college students instead of using a traditional deficit-focused model.

Aims/Research Questions

This study will consist of five research questions:

1. What are the strengths of Black first-generation college students here at Ohio State?
2. How do strengths differ based on sex?
3. How do strengths differ based on age?
4. How do strengths differ based on family income (measured by Pell Grant Eligibility, if you are eligible for the Pell Grant, you display financial assistance through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FASFA))?
5. How do strengths differ based on grade point average (GPA)?

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

This literature review will focus on the success factors and strengths of the overall first-generation college student population. It will then proceed to discuss some theories that are associated with FGCS and their experiences in higher education. Lastly, we will go through what literature says about Black FGCS.

Body

Success Factors and Strengths

Many factors that contribute to the success of first-generation college students. Those contributing factors include personal characteristics such as problem-solving skills, family support, being highly involved in high school and college readiness programs, and academic and social integration (Falcon, 2015).

A study conducted by Cavazos, Johnson, and Sparrow (2010) on Latinx FGCS was done to understand what kind of coping responses this population used to overcome challenges. In the study, the researchers gathered 11, high achieving, low-income Latinx students who attended a Hispanic-serving institution. The coping responses that were identified were “positive reframing, acceptance, self-talk, maintaining focus on final goals, using low expectations as motivation, self-reflection, taking action, and seeking support (Cavazos et al., 2010)”. In another study that consisted of Latinx and Asian American people, the researchers discovered that students who had personal and career-related motivation to attend college were more likely to adjust to college (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005).

Havlik, Pulliam, Malott, and Steen (2020) conducted a study that analyzed the strengths and struggles of FCGS at a PWI through interviews. When the researchers asked what helped the

students persist, they discovered four themes. The first theme was the perception that the students were achieving something for the greater good or bigger than themselves. The second theme was their internal drive or strength of character. The third theme discovered was the strength of identity or the sense of pride in one's identity. The last theme was relational or the ability to seek out and form supportive relationships.

Barriers

Research has shown that many factors serve as barriers for first-generation college students. According to Lauren Falcon (2015), first-generation college students face low levels of college readiness, financial challenges, racial disparities, low academic self-esteem, and trouble adjusting during their transition to college. Those factors contribute to a lower rate of college completion for FGCS students in comparison to students whose parents have a four-year degree (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014).

In addition, FGCS tend to not have access to the cultural capital that CGCS typically receive from their parents (Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Miller, 2007). Cultural capital is a connection to knowing and understanding what it means to be in college. The lack of it becomes apparent in terms of knowing about college degrees, persistence, and retention resources. (Tello, Lonn, 2017). More negative predictors of college adjustment was the lack of peer support, this could point to the idea that FGCS lacks social capital as well (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005).

Theories

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Some theories have been studied as a possible explanation about FGCS and why they do not perform as well as their counterparts. One of those theories focuses on Maslow's Hierarchy

of Needs and relation to motivation. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is in the order as followed: "physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs (Maslow, 1954)." Social needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization are linked to the barriers of first-generation college students. Many FGCS social needs are unfulfilled when they lack family and social support (Petty, 2014). In addition, FGCS are at risk of dropping out of college and their social and academic integration plays a role in their departure (McCay & Estrella, 2008). FGCS typically have lower self-esteem which is why colleges must provide students with involvements that will provide a sense of belonging and increased self-esteem (Hicks, 2006). Lastly, self-actualization is the realization of one's potential, this contributes to intrinsic motivation (Maslow, 1954). Having intrinsic motivation is linked to higher academic achievement so when FGCS has intrinsic motivation it makes school easier for them (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007).

Cultural Mismatch Theory

Another theory is the cultural mismatch theory, which is a framework for understanding how universities may contribute to the attrition among FGCS (Covarrubias, Valle, Laiduc & Azmitia, 2019). When students do not reflect the university's middle-class culture of independence they are at a disadvantage (Stephen, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). Many FGCS engage in family roles and once enrolled in the university they still want to continue their family contributions simultaneously to completing their schoolwork (Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield, & Burgos-Cienfuegos, 2015). The commitment and desire to keep their family roles might not match the university's expectation of being independent and dedicating one's time to their individual goals (Covarrubias, et al., 2019). This phenomenon is prevalent in Latinx and Asian American communities but can be valid for other cultures and individual

family roles. This clash of cultures can negatively impact minoritized groups as this does not favor them. This could result in attrition and a negative sense of belonging. Research has indicated that at predominately white institutions (PWIs) students of color who are FGCS may experience culture shock, isolation, and individual and/or systemic racism which causes their college experience to be challenging and stressful (McCoy, 2014). Students in such settings are then tasked with identifying and navigating the dominant norms at PWIs. These norms are often unspoken and perpetuate the dominant, White and/or Eurocentric worldview that is embedded in the institutions' policies, practices, and physical structures, all of which makes college difficult for students who do not share that world view. (Havlik et al., 2020).

Current Interventions

Colleges are taking many different approaches to address the needs of FGCS. One of the ways they are trying to address FGCS needs is through bridge programs. These programs offer FGCS college-level academic coursework and resources (libraries, tutoring centers, advising, time management and study skills, etc.) that the college offers which could be essential to their success. (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019). Another approach is creating integrated programs that include tutoring, cohort models, and mentoring. Integrated programs have been found successful because of the community of support they create for students, faculty, and staff (Holcombe & Kezar, 2019). Lowery-Hart and Pacheco (2011) offered one of the major critiques of these types of programs. They believed these programs often isolate FGCS and create a false culture that does not fully align with the culture across the entire campus. This is something that could be damaging to FGCS with other underrepresented identities.

Black FGCS

The impact of possessing first-generation status is not consistent across different identities. FGCS status among Black men predicted GPAs lower than those of their white and female counterparts. The same study also indicated that being Black was a significant negative predictor of achievement in college and had a negative relationship with cumulative GPA (Strayhorn, 2006). This could be because of racism, which can be experienced in both K-12 and college settings (Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017). Due to segregation and how schools are funded, many Black urban youths are concentrated into underfunded K-12 school systems which may cause students to enter higher education not fully prepared for the academic rigors, as compared to their White counterparts (Savitz-Romer, 2012). Black students also face stereotyping and discrimination from faculty and peers, which results in a hostile environment and exclusion (Havlik et al., 2020). Those findings point to the idea that Black FGCS face unique challenges and circumstances that negatively impact their achievement levels in college. Since Black FGCS face unique challenges compared to their other FGCS peers, we must continue to utilize research to understand and address this unique experience.

Chapter Summary

First-generation college students do have strengths that allow them to perform well in higher education but there are barriers that pull them in the opposite direction, some of which could be considered environmental factors. Although theories can give us a good foundation to understand the challenges this population face, they do not tell the full story. Colleges are taking different approaches to supporting FGCS, but often take a deficit approach that can be harmful for this population. Being Black and FGCS creates a unique experience that brings unique

challenges compared to the FGCS peers. In efforts to understand more about this population the current study focused on their character strengths.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Design

We utilized a Cross Sectional Quantitative Study design. This design was chosen because it allowed us to utilize surveys to measure the character strengths of Black FGCS at The Ohio State University across the six campuses.

Population and Sample Design

There are 1,891 Black first-generation college students at The Ohio State University across all regional campuses. We utilized a purposive sampling design where we reached out to all individuals that met the specific eligibility criteria.

To be eligible for our study participants had to:

1. Be a student at The Ohio State University (regional campuses included).
2. Be between the ages of 18 and 25.
3. Identify as Black.
4. Be a first-generation college student according to The Ohio State University's definition.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected by utilizing social media and recruitment emails that were sent out by myself, university student organizations, and university leadership and entities (Office of Student Academic Success, College of Social Work, deans at the regional campuses, etc.). The recruitment email included information about the study, a consent form, and a link to a Qualtrics survey that collected demographic data. At the end of the Qualtrics survey, participants were given the link to the strengths assessment. The collection period ran from February 24th to March 26th.

Data Collection Instruments

This study utilized two data collection instruments. The first was the Qualtrics survey which included eligibility questions, the consent form, and demographic questions. At the conclusion of the Qualtrics survey was the link to the second instrument, the VIA-IS-P strengths assessment. The VIA-IS-P is a 96-item survey that utilizes a scoring key scale that ranges from 1 to 5. Data were analyzed utilizing SPSS. Table 1 shows the revised list of strengths and descriptions that are measured in the VIA-IS-P assessment (McGrath, 2019).

Table 1
Revised List of Strengths and Descriptions

| |
|--|
| Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence: You notice the beauty and excellence around you; you are often awe-struck by beauty, greatness, and/or the moral goodness you witness; you are often filled with wonder. |
| Bravery/Courage: You face your fears and overcome challenges and adversity; you stand up for what is right; you do not shrink in the face of pain or inner tension or turmoil. |
| Creativity: You are viewed as a creative person; you see, do, and/or create things that are of use; you think of unique ways to solve problems and be productive. |
| Curiosity: You are an explorer; you seek novelty; you are interested in new activities, ideas, and people; you are open to new experiences. |
| Fairness: You believe strongly in an equal and just opportunity for all; you don't let personal feelings bias your decisions about others; you treat people the way you want to be treated. |
| Forgiveness/Mercy: You readily let go of hurt after you are wronged; you give people a second chance; you are not vengeful or resentful; you accept people's shortcomings. |

Gratitude: You regularly experience and express thankfulness; you don't take the good things that happen in your life for granted; you tend to feel blessed in many circumstances.

Honesty: You are a person of high integrity and authenticity; you tell the truth; even when it hurts; you present yourself to others in a sincere way; you take responsibility for your actions.

Hope: You are optimistic, expecting the best to happen; you believe in and work toward a positive future; you can think of many pathways to reach your goals.

Modesty/Humility: You let your accomplishments speak for themselves; you see your own goodness but prefer to focus the attention on others; you do not see yourself as more special than others; you admit your imperfections.

Humor: You are playful; you love to make people smile and laugh; your sense of humor helps you connect closely to others; you brighten gloomy situations with fun and/or jokes.

Judgement/Critical Thinking: You are analytical; you examine things from all sides; you do not jump to conclusions, but instead attempt to weigh all the evidence when making decisions.

Kindness: You do good things for people; you help and care for others; you are generous and giving; you are compassionate.

Leadership: You positively influence those you lead; you prefer to lead than to follow; you are very good at organizing and taking charge for the collective benefit of the group.

Love of Learning: You often find ways to deepen your knowledge and experiences; you regularly look for new opportunities to learn; you are passionate about building knowledge.

Love: You are warm and genuine to others; you not only share but are open to receiving love from others; you value growing close and intimate with others.

Perseverance: You keep going and going when you have a goal in mind; you attempt to overcome all obstacles; you finish what you start.

Perspective/Wisdom: You take the “big picture” view of things, others turn to you for wise advice; you help others make sense of the world; you learn from your mistakes.

Prudence: You are wisely cautious; you are planful and conscientious; you are careful to not take undue risks or do things you might later regret.

Self-Regulation: You are a very disciplined person; you manage your vices and bad habits; you stay calm and cool under pressure; you manage your impulses and emotions.

Social Intelligence: You pay close attention to social nuances and the emotions of others; you have good insight into what makes people “tick”; you seem to know what to say and do in any social situation.

Spirituality: You hold a set of beliefs, whether religious or not, about how your life is part of something bigger and more meaningful; those beliefs shape your behavior and provide a sense of comfort, understanding, and purpose.

Teamwork: You are a collaborative and participative member on groups and teams; you are loyal to your group; you feel a strong sense of duty to your group; you always do your share.

Zest: You are enthusiastic toward life; you are highly energetic and activated; you use your energy to the fullest degree.

© Copyright 2004-2021, VIA Institute on Character. All Rights Reserved. Used with Permission. www.viacharacter.org

Chapter Summary

This study utilized a cross sectional quantitative study design to analyze the strengths of Black FGCS at The Ohio State University.

Chapter 4: Results

Results

Participant Characteristics

As shown in Table 2, the study had a total of 119 participants, and they met the eligibility requirements for the study. 92% (n=109) of the participants were from Columbus campus; 7% (n=8) were from Newark; and 1% (n=2) were from Mansfield. The mean age of the sample was 20.38 (SD= 1.8). Out of 119 participants, 26% (n=31) identified as male and 74% (n=88) identified as female. Participants were able to enter their GPA, which we recoded them into three categories: GPA 1, which was less than 3.0; GPA 2, which included 3.0 to 3.499; and GPA 3, which included 3.5 to 4.0. Out of the 119 participants, 116 participants reported a GPA, 16% (n=19) were in the GPA 1 category; 41% (n=48) were in the GPA 2 category; and 42% (n=49) were in GPA 3 category. Out of 119 participants, 8% (n=10) answered “No” being Pell Grant eligible; 78% (n=93) answered “Yes”; and 13% (n=16) answered “Unsure”.

Table 2
Demographic Characteristics

| Characteristics | N or M(SD) % (N) |
|-----------------|---------------------|
| Campus | 119 |
| Columbus | 92% (109) |
| Newark | 7% (8) |
| Lima | 0 |
| Mansfield | 1% (2) |
| Marion | 0 |
| ATI in Wooster | 0 |
| Age | 20.38 (1.8) |
| Sex | 119 |
| Male | 26% (31) |
| Female | 74% (88) |

| | |
|------------------------|----------|
| GPA | 116 |
| Cat 1: < 3.0 | 16% (19) |
| Cat 2: 3.0 – 3.499 | 41% (48) |
| Cat 3: 3.5 – 4.0 | 42% (49) |
| Pell Grant Eligibility | 119 |
| No | 8% (10) |
| Yes | 78% (93) |
| Unsure | 13% (16) |

Question 1: Strengths of Black first-generation college students here at Ohio State?

As shown in Table 3, 24-character strengths were measured for each individual student. The strengths for each individual were scored on a 1 to 5 scale and they were ranked from 1 to 24. To create Table 2, we took the average of each strength score and rank and then we listed the scores in descending order and recoded the ranking averages to give each character strength an overall ranking. Every character strength had an average score of at least 3.3 which is greater than the middle number on the Likert Scale. Out of 24-character strengths 5 had an average score greater than 4.0, 17 that had an average score of 3.99 to 3.5, and 2 that had an average score of 3.49 to 3.33. Strengths were combined to create what the VIA calls six virtues, Wisdom, Justice, Humanity, Transcendence, Temperance, and Courage (McGrath, 2019). Each of the virtues had an average score above 3.5.

Table 3
Mean differences by Scores and Ranks

| Character Strengths and Virtues | Average Scores | Average Rank |
|---------------------------------|----------------|--------------|
| Kindness | 4.192 | 1 (7.125) |
| Fairness | 4.119 | 3 (8.9167) |
| Perspective | 4.105 | 4 (10.0917) |
| Honesty | 4.094 | 2 (8.0333) |
| Curiosity | 4.014 | 7 (10.8583) |
| Judgement | 3.960 | 9 (11.2583) |
| Humor | 3.960 | 5 (10.1083) |
| Social Intelligence | 3.948 | 14 (12.5917) |

| | | |
|--|-------|--------------|
| Hope | 3.927 | 10 (11.2833) |
| Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence | 3.916 | 15 (12.8583) |
| Prudence | 3.873 | 18 (14.0833) |
| Leadership | 3.85 | 17 (13.65) |
| Spirituality | 3.846 | 6 (10.675) |
| Gratitude | 3.842 | 11 (11.75) |
| Humility | 3.831 | 16 (13.325) |
| Love of Learning | 3.825 | 12 (11.8) |
| Love | 3.8 | 8 (10.925) |
| Creativity | 3.779 | 13 (12.425) |
| Teamwork | 3.770 | 20 (15.0167) |
| Bravery | 3.704 | 19 (14.3833) |
| Forgiveness | 3.6 | 21 (15.1583) |
| Self-Regulation | 3.504 | 22 (17.0167) |
| Zest | 3.369 | 24 (19.0667) |
| Perseverance | 3.338 | 23 (17.6) |
| Wisdom Virtue (Creativity, Curiosity, Judgement, Love of Learning, and Perspective) | 3.99 | |
| Justice Virtue (Teamwork, Fairness, Leadership) | 3.965 | |
| Humanity Virtue (Love, Kindness, Social Intelligence) | 3.933 | |
| Transcendence Virtue (Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence, Gratitude, Hope, Humor, Spirituality) | 3.658 | |
| Temperance Virtue (Forgiveness, Humility, Prudence, Self-Regulation) | 3.635 | |
| Courage Virtue (Bravery, Perseverance, Honesty, Zest) | 3.558 | |

Question 2: How do strengths differ based on sex?

As shown in Table 4, the difference between the average scores for the character strengths of Curiosity, Creativity, and Bravery were all statistically significant based on sex. The average score for Curiosity for males was 4.35 and 3.91 for females; the average score for Creativity for males was 4.13 and 3.67 for females; and the average score for Bravery for males was 4.03 and 3.61 for females.

Question 3: How do strengths differ based on age?

As shown in Table 4, six character strengths were positively and significantly correlated with age. The six character strengths were Hope, Leadership, Gratitude, Bravery, Zest, and Perseverance. The correlation value for Hope was .21; the correlation value for Leadership was .18; the correlation value for Gratitude was .21; the correlation value for Bravery was .28; the correlation value for Zest was .22; and the correlation value for Perseverance was .24.

Question 4: How do strengths differ based on family income?

As shown in Table 4, the difference between the average scores for the character strengths of Leadership and Bravery were statistically significant based on family income (Pell Grant eligibility). The average score for Leadership for people who were not Pell Grant eligible was 4.18; 3.89 for those who were Pell Grant eligible; and 3.42 for those who were unsure if they were Pell Grant eligible. The average score for Bravery for people who were not Pell Grant eligible was 4.28; 3.72 for those who were Pell Grant eligible; and 3.26 for those who were unsure if they were Pell Grant eligible.

Question 5: How do strengths differ based on grade point average (GPA)?

As shown in Table 4, the difference between the average scores for the character strengths of Creativity, Bravery, and Zest were statistically significant based on grade point average. GPA scores were recoded into three categories: Cat. 1 is < 3.0; Cat 2. is from 3.0 – 3.499; Cat 3. is from 3.5 – 4.0. The average score for Creativity for Cat. 1 was 3.66; 3.99 for Cat. 2; and 3.61 for Cat 3. The average score for Bravery for Cat. 1 was 3.50; 3.92 for Cat. 2; and 3.54 for Cat. 3. The average score for Zest for Cat. 1 was 3.18; 3.55 for Cat. 2; and 3.22 for Cat. 3.

Table 4
Mean differences by Demographics

| Strengths and Virtues | All | Sex | Pell Grant Eligibility | GPA | Correlation with Age |
|-------------------------------------|-------|----------------------------------|---|---------|----------------------|
| Kindness | 4.192 | p = .19 | p = .06 | p = .86 | -.02 p = .86 |
| Fairness | 4.119 | p = .06 | p = 1.0 | p = .39 | .05 p = .62 |
| Perspective | 4.105 | p = .35 | p = .66 | p = .19 | .12 p = .20 |
| Honesty | 4.094 | p = .47 | p = .36 | p = .92 | .13 p = .14 |
| Curiosity | 4.014 | p = .001* (M: 4.35 F:3.91) | p = .06 | p = .25 | .10 p = 3.1 |
| Judgement | 3.960 | p = .18 | p = .97 | p = .29 | .07 p = .47 |
| Humor | 3.960 | p = .05 | p = .82 | p = .54 | .16 p = .08 |
| Social Intelligence | 3.948 | p = .14 | p = .65 | p = .52 | .05 p = .61 |
| Hope | 3.927 | p = .24 | p = .51 | p = .27 | .21 p = .02* |
| Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence | 3.916 | p = .51 | p = .24 | p = .67 | .08 p = .37 |
| Prudence | 3.873 | p = .92 | p = .97 | p = .89 | .15 p = .10 |
| Leadership | 3.85 | p = .08 | p = .04* (N: 4.18 Y: 3.89 U: 3.42) | p = .70 | .18 p = .04* |
| Spirituality | 3.846 | p = .09 | p = .72 | p = .82 | .15 p = .09 |
| Gratitude | 3.842 | p = .90 | p = .55 | p = .83 | .21 p = .02 |

| | | | | | |
|--|-------|-----------------------------------|---|---|------------------|
| Humility | 3.831 | p = .23 | p = .87 | p = .90 | .12 p = .20 |
| Love of Learning | 3.825 | p = .31 | p = .67 | p = .15 | .05 p = .61 |
| Love | 3.8 | p = .67 | p = .17 | p = .45 | .02 p = .85 |
| Creativity | 3.779 | p = .002* (M:4.13 F:3.67) | p = .35 | p = .024* (Cat. 1: 3.66, Cat. 2: 3.99, Cat 3.: 3.61) | .07 p = .44 |
| Teamwork | 3.770 | p = .98 | p = .48 | p = .48 | -.05 p = .57 |
| Bravery | 3.704 | p = .001* (M: 4.03 F: 3.61) | p = .0052* (N: 4.28 Y: 3.72 U: 3.26) | p = .03* (Cat. 1: 3.50, Cat. 2: 3.92, Cat. 3: 3.54) | .28 p = .002* |
| Forgiveness | 3.6 | p = .06 | p = .89 | p = .55 | .10 p = .29 |
| Self-Regulation | 3.504 | p = .40 | p = .98 | p = .17 | .17 p = .06 |
| Zest | 3.369 | p = .15 | p = .13 | p = .04* (Cat. 1: 3.18, Cat. 2: 3.55, Cat. 3: 3.22) | .22 p = .01* |
| Perseverance | 3.338 | p = .12 | p = .88 | p = .52 | .24 p = .009* |
| Wisdom Virtue (Creativity, Curiosity, | 3.99 | p = .008* (M: 4.23 F: 3.92) | p = .89 | p = .39 | .02 p = .87 |

| | | | | | |
|---|-------|-----------------------------------|--|---------|------------------|
| Judgement, Love of Learning, and Perspective) | | | | | |
| Justice Virtue (Teamwork, Fairness, Leadership) | 3.965 | p = .004* (M: 4.21 F: 3.87) | p = .02* (N: 4.23 Y: 4.0 U: 3.65) | p = .56 | .11 p = .21 |
| Humanity Virtue (Love, Kindness, Social Intelligence) | 3.933 | p = .36 | p = .16 | p = .52 | -.01 p = .88 |
| Transcendence Virtue (Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence, Gratitude, Hope, Humor, Spirituality) | 3.658 | p = .61 | p = .48 | p = .61 | .28 p = .002* |
| Temperance Virtue (Forgiveness, Humility, Prudence, Self- Regulation) | 3.635 | p = .26 | p = .94 | p = .99 | .09 p = .33 |
| Courage Virtue (Bravery, Perseverance, Honesty, Zest) | 3.558 | p = .002* (M: 3.88 F: 3.46) | p = .24 | p = .11 | .29 p = .001* |

*p < .05

M: Male

F: Female

N: No

Y: Yes

U: Unsure

Cat. 1: < 3.0

Cat. 2: 3.0 – 3.499

Cat. 3: 3.5 – 4.0

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary of Findings

The average score for each character strengths was above the middle number (3) on the scoring scale. The high average scores mean this population possesses high levels of character strengths. Scores on only a few character strengths differed statistically significantly by the demographic characteristics listed in our study aims. This may be due to the average scores being so high all around. One of the reasons we believe that males may have scored higher in bravery and creativity is due to those strengths being more associated to masculinity. In a study conducted by Proudfoot, Kay, and Koval (2015) they discovered that creativity tends to be associated with independence and self-direction which are qualities that are associated with masculinity. Prentice and Carranza (2002) found that the bravery stereotype was associated to men but not women.

Age had a positive correlation with Hope, Leadership, Gratitude, Bravery, Zest, and Perseverance. This could be due to as you get older you have more life experiences that build on these strengths. Black FGCS who were not Pell Grant eligible scored significantly higher in leadership and bravery than their counterparts. This could point to low-income students having less time to be involved in student organizations and events that could help build leadership and bravery because they may spend more of their time working to make ends meet. Category 2 scored higher in Bravery, Creativity and Zest than those in Category 1 and in Category 3. This was very interesting to me. I believe students who are in Category 2. could be more likely to take risks and be more creative in coursework which could deviate from what professors want and can result losing some points. This population of students could also be least focused on achieving some type of GPA and more focused on expressing themselves in their coursework,

which could cause to the increase in Zest. People who have GPAs in Categories 1 and 3 could struggle with these strengths as they may be more focused on getting a high GPA which could limit deviating from the norm which would lower bravery and creativity and that could lead to scoring lower in Zest if they do not reach the GPA, they set out to.

Conclusions and Implications of this Study

This study provides a strengths-based view of Black FGCS at The Ohio State University. This study concluded that (1) Black FGCS' lower average performance in higher education is not due to character flaws. Instead, environmental factors may contribute to performance gaps—environmental factors may include but not limited to poverty, lack of resources, sense of belonging, and institutional approaches to supporting this population.(2) Males scored higher in Curiosity, Creativity, and Bravery than females, likely due to those strengths being associated with masculinity, (3) Age had a positive correlation with the character strengths Hope, Leadership, Gratitude, Bravery, Zest, and Perseverance, (4) Black FGCS who were not low-income scored higher in Leadership and Bravery, (5) Black FGCS between the GPA range of 3.0 – 3.499 scored higher in Bravery, Creativity, and Zest than those below and above that range. This population does have a great amount of character strengths that could potentially be utilized in interventions and supports. We are in need for more research around this population.

Limitations

This study did have some limitations. Out of 1,891 students we only had 119 people respond to our survey. This could be due to us only running the survey for a little over a month. Out of all six campuses that make up The Ohio State University, 109 respondents were from the Columbus campus (main), so it is hard to generalize the findings across campuses.

Recommendations

I have a few recommendations with the information that we have learned in this study. Because so many character strengths were discovered, we recommend that institutions re-evaluate how they are supporting Black FGCS and the effectiveness of their supports. Most of the current interventions take a deficit approach when supporting this population. I recommend that institutions create and implement more interventions and supports for this population around their character strengths. In addition, for more consistent research there needs to be a clear and consistent definition of first-generation college student. The criteria I propose are:

1. Students whose parents and/or guardians have no post-secondary education.
2. Students whose parents and/or guardians do not have at least a bachelor's degree.
 - a. If the student's parent/guardian has an associate degree, they are still considered a first-generation college student.
 - b. If one of the student's siblings has a degree, they are still considered a first-generation college student.
3. Students whose parents and/or guardians obtained a college degree in another country but not in the United States (e.g., international students).

I believe that this definition is clear and inclusive of people of diverse backgrounds. Its use as a definition could lead to more consistent research so that we can better advocate for FGCS.

Reference

- Cataldi, E. F., Bennett, C. T., & Chen, X. (2018). First-Generation Students: College Access, Persistence, and Postbachelor's Outcomes. Stats in Brief. NCES 2018-421. *National Center for Education Statistics*.
- Cavazos Jr, J., Johnson, M. B., & Sparrow, G. S. (2010). Overcoming personal and academic challenges: Perspectives from Latina/o college students. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 9(4), 304-316.
- Center for First-generation Student Success. (2017). Defining first-generation.
<https://firstgen.naspa.org/blog/defining-first-generation>
- Center for First-generation Student Success. (2019). Why celebrate on November 8.
<https://firstgen.naspa.org/blog/why-celebrate-on-november-8>
- Covarrubias, R., Valle, I., Laiduc, G., & Azmitia, M. (2019). “You Never Become Fully Independent”: Family Roles and Independence in First-Generation College Students. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 34(4), 381-410.
- Dennis, J. M., Phinney, J. S., & Chuateco, L. I. (2005). The role of motivation, parental support, and peer support in the academic success of ethnic minority first-generation college students. *Journal of college student development*, 46(3), 223-236.
- Epstein, M.H., & Sharma, J. (1998). The Behavior and Emotional Rating Scale: A strength, based approach to assessment. Austin, TX: PRO-ED.
- Falcon, L. (2015). Breaking down barriers: First-generation college students and college success. *Innovation Showcase*, 10(6).
- First Generation Foundation. (2013). First Generation College Student Opportunities & Challenges. Retrieved from <http://www.firstgenerationfoundation.org/>

- Grace-Odeleye, B., & Santiago, J. (2019). A review of some diverse models of summer bridge programs for first-generation and at-risk college students. *Administrative Issues Journal: Education, Practice & Research*, 9(1), 35–47. <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/10.5929/9.1.2>
- Havlik, S., Pulliam, N., Malott, K., & Steen, S. (2020). Strengths and struggles: First-generation college-goers persisting at one predominantly white institution. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 22(1), 118-140.
- Hicks, T. (2006). Assessing parental involvement of first-generation and second-generation college students. *The ACT 101 Journal*, 9(1), 12-16.
- Holcombe, E., & Kezar, A. (2019). Ensuring Success Among First-Generation, Low-Income, and Underserved Minority Students: Developing a Unified Community of Support. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 0002764219869413.
- Jimerson, S. R., Sharkey, J. D., Nyborg, V. & Furlong, M. J. (2004) ‘Strength-based assessment and school psychology: a summary and synthesis’, *California School Psychologist*, 9 (1), 9–19.
- Lowery-Hart, R., & Pacheco Jr, G. (2011). Understanding the first-generation student experience in higher education through a relational dialectic perspective. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2011(127), 55-68.
- Lundberg, C. A., Schreiner, L. A., Hovaguimian, K., & Slavin Miller, S. (2007). First-generation status and student race/ethnicity as distinct predictors of student involvement and learning. *NASPA Journal*, 44(1), 57-83.
- Maslow, A. H. (1954). *Motivation and personality* (3rd. ed). New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, Inc.

- McCoy, D. L. (2014). A phenomenological approach to understanding first-generation college students of color transitions to one “extreme” predominantly white institution. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 32(1), 155-169.
- McGrath, R. E. (2019). Technical Report: The VIA Assessment Suite for Adults: Development and Initial Evaluation Revised Edition, Cincinnati, OH: VIA Institute on Character.
- McKay, V. C., & Estrella, J. (2008). First-generation student success: The role of faculty interaction in service learning courses. *Communication Education*, 57(3), 356-372.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). Public High School Graduation Rates. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_coi.asp
- Petty, T. (2014). Motivating First-Generation Students to Academic Success and College Completion. *College Student Journal*, 48(2), 257–264.
- Prentice, D. A., & Carranza, E. (2002). What women and men should be, shouldn't be, are allowed to be, and don't have to be: The contents of prescriptive gender stereotypes. *Psychology of women quarterly*, 26(4), 269-281.
- Próspero, M., & Vohra-Gupta, S. (2007). First generation college students: Motivation, integration, and academic achievement. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 31(12), 963-975.
- Proudfoot, D., Kay, A. C., & Koval, C. Z. (2015). A gender bias in the attribution of creativity: Archival and experimental evidence for the perceived association between masculinity and creative thinking. *Psychological science*, 26(11), 1751-1761.
- Reynolds, R., & Mayweather, D. (2017). Recounting racism, resistance, and repression: Examining the experiences and# hashtag activism of college students with critical race theory and counternarratives. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 86(3), 283-304.

- RTI International. (2019). First-generation College Students: Demographic Characteristics and Postsecondary Enrollment. Washington, DC: NASPA. Retrieved from <https://firstgen.naspa.org/files/dmfile/FactSheet-01.pdf>
- Savitz-Romer, M. (2012). The gap between influence and efficacy: College readiness training, urban school counselors, and the promotion of equity. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 51*(2), 98-111.
- Stephens, N. M., Fryberg, S. A., Markus, H. R., Johnson, C. S., & Covarrubias, R. (2012). Unseen disadvantage: how American universities' focus on independence undermines the academic performance of first-generation college students. *Journal of personality and social psychology, 102*(6), 1178.
- Stephens, N. M., Hamedani, M. G., & Destin, M. (2014). Closing the social-class achievement gap: A difference-education intervention improves first-generation students' academic performance and all students' college transition. *Psychological science, 25*(4), 943-953.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2006). Factors influencing the academic achievement of first-generation college students. *naspa Journal, 43*(4), 82-111.
- Tello, A. M., & Lonn, M. R. (2017). The Role of High School and College Counselors in Supporting the Psychosocial and Emotional Needs of Latinx First-Generation College Students. *Professional Counselor, 7*(4), 349-359.
- The Ohio State University. (2021). First-generation students > first year experience > the Ohio State University. Retrieved from <https://fye.osu.edu/firstgen.html>
- The Ohio State University Office of Student Academic Success. (2020).

Vasquez-Salgado, Y., Greenfield, P. M., & Burgos-Cienfuegos, R. (2015). Exploring home-school value conflicts: Implications for academic achievement and well-being among Latino first-generation college students. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 30(3), 271-305.